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ABSTRACT

Scholars know the history of oppression. They know that struggles against oppression do not evolve in a vacuum. They may suspect that where discrimination exists, revolt is only an inch below the surface. What many may not realize is that the African-American fought against bigotry, racism, vigilante injustice, brutal violence, lynching, terror, and death in this democracy. The struggle against these forces, the strength necessary for the struggle, and the odds against success in the struggle are little known, especially in international circles. It required great coverage to fight for inclusion into the economic, social, political, judicial, and educational mainstreams as a matter of right, not a matter of privilege. The struggle was a challenge to the U.S. definition and practice of democracy and a challenge to move beyond that definition as practiced. This paper describes this struggle of African-Americans before and after World War II and shows how their successes helped other minority groups in the United States (women, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans) by providing a model for successful resistance. A 28-item bibliography is included. (JB)

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AN ESSAY ON THE POST WORLD WAR II CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY AND BEYOND

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POST WORLD WAR II CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT:
THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY AND BEYOND

The purpose of this presentation is twofold: to describe the African-American struggle to become full participants in the democratic process before and after World War II; and to demonstrate that by these struggles, African-Americans exposed the imperfections and weaknesses of the democratic society and provided a blueprint of how to resist oppression and how to resist oppression successfully. In other words, the struggle was a movement beyond Democracy--a struggle not simply to enter the status quo as it existed but to fundamentally change the practice of Democracy in the United States. Since the history of Africans in South Africa is not just a history of Apartheid, the history of Africans in America is not just a history of oppression. Therefore, the goal here is not to bring to you a history of oppression in America or of the oppressive nature/structure of Democracy. The challenge is to describe the African struggle against oppression in America. Additionally, the goal is not to present to you a "roll call" of the famous--a list of great African-American leaders. The challenge is to describe the struggle of the African masses against oppression in America.

Democracy is defined as government by the people, i.e. with supreme power vested in the people and exercised

directly by them or indirectly through elected officials. This definition, expanded over time, today encompasses the concept of the "common people," the notion of people as the source of political authority, and the belief in the respect for the individual within the community. Though in 1947, the Office of Military Government United States (OMGUS) defined Democracy in its directive as a system in which

a. the rule of law must prevail,
b. all power must originate with the people and be subject to popular control,
c. political parties represent voluntary associations of citizens rather than instrumentalities of govenment,
d. those in power regularly renew their mandate in popular elections which must feature at least two competing parties, democratic in nature,
e. instruments of public opinion (press and radio) must be free from government domination, and
f. basic individual rights must be protected by law and the powers of the federal government must be limited by the Constitution.

But however defined or explained principles of Democracy have remained the same whether the prevailing terminology was Jeffersonian Democracy, Jacksonian Democracy, Republicanism or Progressivism.

However, a nation founded on these principles consistently found itself unwilling or unable to extend benefits to a people who surfaced on the North American continent in 1526, who became willing immigrants in 1619 and forced immigrants by the 1640s, and who suffered hereditary enslavement after 1662. But as slaves and later as freedmen (before and after the Civil War) these people tested the principles on which the nation stood. African-Americans fought in the Colonial and Revolutionary battles, instituted conspiracies and revolts, produced newspapers and books, explored the West as cowboys and farmers, founded organizations to help themselves, and fought back against riots and lynching. The rationale was enunciated thusly: "We refuse to allow the impression to remain that the Negro American assents to inferiority, is submissive under oppression and apologetic before insults." (Niagara Platform, 1905) The system of segregation (Jim Crow) in place by the 1890s expanded swiftly and tightly. Educationally, Jim Crow was segregated schools and inferior education. Judicially, Jim Crow saw to it that all fundamental civil liberties guaranteed by the Constitution were denied--such liberties as the right to due process of law and the right to trial by a jury of one's peers. Furthermore, those African-Americans convicted of crimes most often became a part of the convict-leasing system whereby prisoners worked only for Anglo-American contractors

and their wages were paid to prison officials, not to the prisoners or their families. Economically, Jim Crow stood for the denial of jobs, equal pay where jobs were available, job protection by employers and labor unions as well as adequate housing, food and health care. Politically, African-Americans were denied voting rights and the right to hold public office. Socially, Jim Crow required signs specifying color over water fountains, separate hospitals and cemetaries, different Bibles in courtrooms and more, including the separation of blood by color of the donor in blood banks. Underlying this system of oppression was the federal government's abject failure to enforce the rights guaranteed by the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. The situation in America from the African-American perspective was simply "Apartheid USA."

But the militant mood which flashed in slavery with insurrections, petitions, daily resistance and David Walker's Appeal (1829), flashed under early Jim Crow with boycotts, "sit-ins," institution building and migration. The militancy against the denial of liberty flashed in the 1920s with Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association with its call to return to Africa and its emphasis on the beauty of blackness and with Claude McKay's stirring rhetoric that "if we must die, . . . let us nobly die . . . fighting black!" The poem written after the "Red

Summer" of 1919 (twenty-six race riots) was placed in the Congressional Record by Henry Cabot Lodge as an example of the "dangerous currents" among African-Americans. The 1930s witnessed overt reactions against the Bronx (N.Y.) "slave marts" where African-American women, standing on street corners, were forced to sell their "wares" (domestic skills) for starvation wages on a daily basis to wealthy suburbanites. Outrage for these and other incidents acted as an impetus to the founding of the National Negro Congress (NNC-1935) which urged the unionization of African-American women workers, desegregation of public accommodations and schools and anti-lynching legislation in its attempt to accomplish unity of action among all existing protest organizations. The NNC went further. In its list of resolutions, the organization condemned war, colonialism, fascism and the attempt to subjugate Ethiopia, and Colonialism, both in the imperial sense as well as the domestic sense.

By this time, the United States, gearing up its industrial production for possible war, envisioned its great destiny: "It must be a sharing with all peoples of our Bill of Rights, our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, our magnificant industrial products, our technical skills" and set an example as "the dynamic center of ever-widening spheres of enterprise . . . the training center of the skilled servants of mankind." (Henry Luce,

1941) This vision resulted in an aggressive mandate in foreign and domestic affairs. But the assault on racial and ethnic domestic problems was too meager. African-Americans decided to intensify their own assault against injustice.

The national verbal opposition to fascism and nazism indicated to African-Americans that World War II was, in part, a fight against racism. The rhetoric of equality, Democracy, "saving the world" became a part of American patriotism which African-Americans accepted. However, while accepting the rejection of the master race ideology, they were not content to simply wait out the war as they had done during World War I when minority leaders allowed patriotic rhetoric to overshadow reality. The community demanded that all gains made not be lost and that the struggle for equality should proceed unabated and, if necessary, proceed on an intensified scale. Consequently, it was during the period immediately before the war that the African-Americaqn community stepped up protest against injustice. Ironically, even while the democratic slogans of war were being enunciated and while the war was being fought African-Americans were subjected to harrasssment, lynchings and riots. As a matter of fact there were some 243 racial conflicts during the war years, the worst in Detroit, the "arsenal of Democracy" where the riot led to a loss of thirty-four African-American lives and millions in war production. Additionally, war efforts themselves emphasized

the disparity between the creed and practice of Democracy as African-Americans faced rigid discrimination in industry and the armed forces. With the disparity, many realized that perhaps the war was not being waged to end racism but to retain the fundamental elements of the American system including segregation and discrimination.

The African-American responses to discrimination coalesced in 1941 into the March on Washington Movement--regarded as one of the most brilliant power plays ever executed by an ethnic minority. Bringing together all the bitterness, protest, unrest, frustration, trauma and believing that the power of organized masses affects policy, African-Americans threatened to bring to Washington one hundred thousand people to participate in a protest march on 01 July 1941 against discrimination in defense industries, the government itself, and the armed forces. The president (Franklin D. Roosevelt) capitulated after serious attempts at negotiation had failed and issued on 25 June 1941 the famous Executive Order 8802. The order which forbade discrimination based on race, color or national origin in defense industries and in the government was hailed as a victory even though the armed services would remain segregated until Executive Order 9981 (issued in 1948 by Harry S. Truman). But the victory, although partial, gave credence to the idea of mass concerted African-American protest.

Additionally, the 161 community newspapers, led by the "Big Four" [Pittsburgh (PA) Courier, Chicago (IL) Defender, Baltimore (MD) Afro-American, Norfolk (VA) Journal and Guide] began a campaign for the "Double-V"--victory at home and abroad--by aggressively pointing out the similarities between the American and the German treatment of ethnic minorities. The papers publicized protests, rallies, boycotts and headlined atrocities committed against African-American civilians and soldiers. The struggles continued as the nation became aware that these descendants of slaves were as resolved to undermine caste as their forbears had been resolved to undermine slavery--in ways as many and varied as the ways of oppression.

In 1942, southern African-American leadership issued its "Durham Manifesto" which called for equality of education and of economic and political opportunity. The same year, midwestern leaders met in Chicago and formed the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) which staged, before the year was over, its first "sit-in." CORE, although committed to non-violence, did advocate forcing direct confrontation with all degrading racial policies legally sanctioned in the United States. Within five years, CORE sponsored a series of "wade-ins" and "freedom rides." "Freedom rides" were reinstituted by CORE in 1961 to test the strength of Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia (1946) against the custom of segregation on interstate bus transportation, while the

earlier challenges against segregated local bus service had borne fruit. In 1956, the Alabama church leadership had used successfully an old tactic to end local bus segregation. The Montgomery Bus Boycott was not the first but the last of these activities to force a change in local customs. There were some thirty economic boycotts of local buses between 1900 and 1906 which were successful in at least three-fourths of the cities involved. Out of the 1956 effort came the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

The legal attacks against segregation and discrimination began not long after the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1901. Cases taken up included the infamous "Scottsboro Boys" action in 1931, and the initial assaults on segregated education in 1933 which culminated in the 1954 Supreme Court decision of Brown v. Topeka Board of Education which overturned the principle of "separate but equal" established by the Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1896. The fight for equal education continues today--step by step, case by case.

While the struggles for integrated transportation and equal educational opportunities were in progress, African-Americans continued using other tactics to end the withholding of Democracy from them. The tumultuous decade of the 1960s began with a series of "sit-ins" initiated by southern college students as a way to confront the local

customs of segregation. The first three years witnessed hundreds of "sit-ins," "wade-ins," "jail-ins," "pray-ins," marches, pickets, and boycotts. These youth and their leaders, recognizing the need for unity of effort, came together in 1960 to form the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The organization was dedicated to the ideology of non-violence and to the tactic of unified, collective action. They became the "guerrillas," the "trouble-makers," the "fleas" that harrassed local officials who stood behind the rhetoric of white supremacy. They exhibited deliberate harshness and believed that their actions were the essence of Democracy. By 1966, however, realizing that the system had not changed, SNCC shifted to an increasingly militant, ethnocentric position. It was also in 1966 that a new slogan was heard--"Black Power"--a call for freedom from fear, for the closing of ranks, self-defense, self-help, self-determination and economic, political, racial and cultural solidarity. Even the older organizations shifted as CORE proposed that the right to self-defense was a constitutional right in the face of continued Anglo-American violence. The year 1966 also marked the formation date of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense--an organization whose members openly carried weapons which members said were needed to protect African-American citizens against the horror of racism. Another realm of activities which

developed out of the promises and betrayals were the series of riots during the 1960s. They began in Harlem (New York City) in 1964, and spread to Watts (Los Angeles) in 1965, to forty-three open conflicts in 1966, to one hundred riots in 1968. This was urban African-America at its bitterest. Additional militancy was evidenced by the formation by 1967 of such organizations as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, a group which espoused violent confrontation when necessary.

Mass marches increased in volume and frequency in the early 1960s, culminating in the two hundred thousand participants in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. After 1963 marchers were, in many places, attacked verbally and physically as in the Selma to Montgomery (AL) March in 1965. It was on the 1966 march against fear, discrimination, harrassment from Memphis (TN) to Jackson (MS) where the slogan "Black Power" was first uttered by a 16-year-old African-American man-child.

The constitutional right to vote was difficult to acquire even after the legal challenges which started in 1870 culminated in the 1944 decision of Smith v. Allwright which allowed African-American participation in the all-important election primaries. To aid in and speed up the process, students by the hundreds went southward to take part in the Mississippi Summer Freedom Project in 1964. This valiant attempt to register voters came to be

considered the high point of the nonviolent struggle although violence was certainly visited on the registration workers. During that summer, three were killed, eighty were wounded, over one thousand were arrested, thirty-five churches and thirty homes were bombed but Mississippi entered the Fall with over twelve hundred newly registered African-Americans voters. Out of this effort came the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party which by the 1968 Democratic convention was able to seat two of its delegates. African-Americans went a step further and attempted in 1972 to establish a third political party. Eight thousand people went to Gary, Indiana, where they adopted resolutions ranging from busing to American foreign policy. There were, however, other problems and issues to be faced. One of the largest was, of course, abject poverty in the land of plenty.

In 1968, African-American leaders staged the Poor Peoples' Campaign for Economic Justice--a campaign which recognized that the right to eat in a non-segregated restaurant presumed a wage-earning level above starvation level. It was not enough to vote in elections, swim in pools, eat in restaurants. This concern for economic justice for over 25% of the American population would grow into a massive civil disobedience strategy where thousands would descend on Washington, DC, and remain there until some demands were met for jobs and income. By May of 1968,

demonstrators had erected tents near Lincoln Memorial and called their living space Resurrection City. Economic concerns, always present, flashed again in 1971 with the formation of Operation PUSH (People United to Serve Humanity) and later in the 1980 March on Washington for Jobs, Peace and Justice.

The Civil Rights Movement, then, was more than radicalism as an ideology. It was a rejection of long-abused authority. It was fearlessness in the face of overwhelming power. It was a struggle which went beyond Democracy. It was a revolution beyond race aggrandizement. It challenged a nation's values in its opposition to all forms of injustices.

One of the first problems exposed by the African-American struggle was the inadequacy of the democratic structure in the United States to bring about social change peacefully and without the use of mass concerted pressure. This community turned in desperation to planned confrontation in order to redress its grievances. Additionally, the quest brought to the forefront the problem of free expression in a Democracy--a right which should be guarded jealously. All too often, in the period after World War II (and before) participants confronted obstacles to the rights of petition and peaceful assembly. Those who tested

the Bill of Rights found themselves captured and imprisoned by the so-called guardians of domestic tranquility, the police. The true turning point for many was the realization that officers would fire on and kill not only African-Americans (Jackson State University, 1970) but also on Anglo-Americans (Kent State, 1970) and that the federal government offered no protection against the most basic infringement of Constitutional rights.

Because the struggle was something more than "sit-ins" and "freedom rides," participants and observers discovered that in this Democracy there were different kinds of justice with reference to poor or rich. Wealth determined whether one went to jail or went free. This issue which went beyond race continues today as a serious fallacy in American Democracy. On another economic level, the concept of the sanctity of private property was rethought because private enterprise often affected and affects the public interest and need was and is more important than profit. The question of inequitable distribution would remain unresolved unless the economic system was restructured and to date this has not been accomplished. The struggles of the African-American set in motion attempts to create and recreate out of the powerless, a new force which would see to it that true Democracy prevailed.

In the final analysis, the struggle for Democracy and beyond presented a format for successful resistance for use

by other groups in America who had not been given access to the "American Dream." With its emphasis on not categorizing or labeling individuals, the blueprint manifested itself in the rise of the counter-culture among youth who insisted that individuals should be recognized for their human dignity rather than for what society said they were. The Women's Liberation Movement also expressed renewed interest in individualism by demanding acceptance based on qualities and skills and not on stereotypes about a woman's place in society. The process of protest promoted increasing rejection of deference to authority. In consequence, the strategies of the African-American struggles were used to mount a full domestic revolt against the Vietnam War. Leaders in the communities and on college campuses initiated "teach-ins" while protest marches grew larger. By 1967, the efficacy of mass marches was verified as appropriate when two hundred thousand demonstrators went to Washington. The largest march against the Vietnam War occurred in 1970 when over five hundred thousand protestors filed into the nation's capital.

The era after World War II saw the emergence of other powerful liberation movements following the format established by African-Americans. One example was the Indian American movement which, repeatedly thwarted in its attempts at negotiation and peaceful redress of centuries-old grievances, presented in 1961 the Declaration

of Indian Purpose which stressed cultural liberation. In later years, following the models of African-American militancy, the younger, more strident voices in the Indian communities formed such organizations as the American Indian Movement (AIM). Founded in 1968, AIM succeeded in winning a little of the government's attention but it was too little too late, and insurgent groups turned instead to direct action which included occupation of land in the San Francisco Bay (federal abandoned land of Alcatraz Island), occupation of the building which housed the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, the celebrated two-month long siege and protest at Wounded Knee and the 1988 Cherokee takeover of government offices in North Carolina. Indian Americans also used and use legal strategies to force victories from the federal courts--legal strategies which sought and seek the return of the lands taken illegally before 1900. Mexican-Americans took a page from the memoirs of the Black Panthers and the Black Muslims by forming paramilitary units (Brown Berets) which patrolled the Mexican-American border looking for Ku Klux Klan members who were attempting to harass illegal immigrants.

The effectiveness of the economic boycott was duplicated in the activities of the United Farm Workers union (UFW) which launched a prolonged strike in 1965 against grape and lettuce growers. Aided by college students, churches, CORE and the NAACP and by active

involvement in political campaigns, the UFW forced many growers to sign contracts with the union for better wages and benefits for farm workers. These boycotts, these prolonged "sit-ins," these marches continue today. The ideology of direct confrontation even found its way into the world of the handicapped as students at Gallaudet University (DC) staged a series of protests against the insensitivity displayed by an administration which would hire a non-signing hearing individual to become the president of a university for the hearing-impaired.

As scholars, we know the history of oppression. We know that struggles against oppression do not evolve in a vacuum. We may suspect that where discrimination exists, revolt is only an inch below the surface. What many may not realize is that the African-American fought against bigotry, racism, vigilante injustice, brutal violence, lynching, terror, death in this Democracy. The struggle against these forces, the strength for struggle, the odds against success in the struggle are little known, especially in international circles. It was valiant warfare to be included into the economic, social, political, judicial, educational mainstreams as a matter of right, not a matter of privilege. But it was much, much more. The struggle was a challenge to the American definition and practice of

Democracy and a challenge to move beyond that definition and that practice.

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